

ZNet | Activism

Online Activism 2.0: Movement Building

by Aaron Kreider; January 08, 2007

Introduction

What has online activism really done to help activists or would-be activists? For most people, online activism equals an inbox full of email. Our participation is restricted and we generally act as passive consumers. For most groups, they struggle to make their small static website interesting (if they have one at all!) and to distribute an email newsletter – mastering the possibilities of the dynamic web lies far beyond their grasp.

These traditional methods of doing online activism are generally good and have increased our ability to communicate, however they are baby steps compared to how the internet could be used to empower activists and would-be activists. If we fail to democratize online activism, then we will have betrayed our progressive principles. The next wave of online activism should emphasize movement building. Instead of the practice of creating tools to try to help one organization fulfill its mission, a practice that has traditionally benefited the larger and better-funded ones, we should create tools for all movement organizations that encourage them to cooperate.

Right now the Left does not need a grand manifesto, a larger-than-the-last-one national demonstration, a charismatic leader, or a progressive presidential candidate. We need to take a step back and start at the grassroots. From there we should build a mass base of part and full time activists, developing the strength and skills of tens of thousands of community activist groups and interweaving them with each other. Strategically used, online activism can be a powerful tool in facilitating the essential off-line work to rebuild the Left from the ground up.

We need to develop a community of activists and web developers, create web sites that share, develop central repositories of information, increase our efficiency, and develop new forms of online activism that dramatically increase participation.

I will discuss the CampusActivism.org / ActivismNetwork.org project (henceforth referred to as CampusActivism.org) as one way of tackling this issue with the hope that it will inspire other people to develop additional solutions.

Activists have many needs and given my limited experience and privileged background, I do not propose to understand or address all of them. For instance, I am unsure as to how effective online activism can be for needs like fundraising and recruitment. Research shows that recruitment works best in-person. People recruit their friends and acquaintances. You can raise money online, but for most groups traditional means of raising money are many times more important. Also there are still many people who either have no access or slow access – and the access to fast computers is also limited. Given these limitations, there is still potential for online activism to promote strategic thinking and action, and developing alliances. Online innovation can lead to an infusion of strategic thinking that will strengthen the Left.

What Activists Need - Strategy

I have participated in several local activist groups that wanted to make a difference, but did not know how to best do it. For instance, after September 11, I helped start the Notre Dame Peace Coalition. The group had a surge of support, however it only organized educational events (speakers, films, and a camp-out) and protests. Notre Dame had 300 students in ROTC (one of the largest programs in the country), was doing approximately one million dollars of military research per year, and was regularly visited by CIA recruiters (Ralph McGehee and Philip Agee, Notre Dame alumni, worked for the CIA and later wrote anti-CIA books documenting its abuses). However, the group members were new to activism, had not attended any trainings, and chose not to take on a local campaign. Similarly the community's Michiana Peace and Justice Coalition struggled to get an effective counter military recruitment campaign to work and spent more time organizing vigils. When these local groups failed to stop a national war, they burnout, lost their sense of purpose, and declined or died. By tying their fortunes to a national campaign, lacking in a local angle and any chance of a local victory, thousands of local groups are giving up their power to make a difference.

I have seen and participated in this same lack of direction in the student environmental movement where a thousand groups are organizing recycling, Earth Day events, park or river clean-ups, educational speakers, showing films – but not doing campaigns. On the other hand, there are groups who have taken on global warming and are getting their universities to buy renewable energy. Another successful story was my experience organizing against sweatshops with the Notre Dame Progressive Student Alliance as part of the United Students Against Sweatshops network. We were adequately connected to the network to model our local campaign on those of other groups – and we won.

In the absence of a well-networked movement, we have the apparent success of MoveOn.org. As described in their "Election 2006 People Powered Politics" report, they have been extremely successful in motivating volunteers to support their agenda. The problem is that a very small group of people set the MoveOn agenda, but they got tens of thousands of people to make phone calls and 250,000 people to donate money. The leadership is almost completely inaccessible, without a personal connection. It's run like a well-oiled corporation, minimizing its payroll by outsourcing the grunt work to organizations like Grassroots Campaigns (See "Activism Inc" for a critique of outsourced politics). MoveOn turns campaigns on and off, activating thousands of volunteers around an election cycle, and then abandoning them. Many activists and progressives who want peace in Iraq have supported MoveOn, and their support is parlayed into votes and dollars for Democrats who vote to support funding for the Iraq war. By contrast, peace activists could be supporting United for Peace and Justice – a democratic coalition with over a thousand member groups that operates on a fraction of MoveOn's budget. We should be investing in movement-building and developing grassroots leaders, not in TV ads and outsourced politics.

Roughly half of the US population opposes the war in Iraq. Together these people are gifted with talents of organization, speaking, networking, writing, reading, analyzing, graphic design, hard-work, and more. However very few of

them are aware of the products of hundreds of years of social struggle because most people do not learn about it in school, or from other forms of training. It isn't a mathematical science, but modern activists have developed strategies based on a social history of struggle and we need to use them to be as effective as possible.

Strategy also includes an understanding of oppression that is systematically missing from the work of most activists. For instance, there is a massive racial divide between predominantly people of color groups and predominantly white groups that will only be bridged when the predominantly white groups receive anti-racist training and then take action. Similar trainings and actions need to be taken regarding class, gender, and sexual orientation for activists to build inclusive and effective organizations and campaigns.

Where do people currently learn strategy? Historically organizations are the key providers of trainings and strategic materials, however the web is an increasingly important player. Organizations accumulate materials and will produce a packet that is an often-disorganized collection of campaign information and skills. The source materials for this are fact-sheets, articles, case studies, and book chapters assembled from a diversity of sources. Some of these materials are faded copies of copies, with the original long lost, the text outdated and fuzzy. It would be useful to have one or more central repositories where materials could be updated to the latest version, where files could be stored in easy-to-use digital formats, and where new and existing organizations could find a basic set of materials that they can use to build packets, create their own versions, and distribute skills materials to their members.

Due to the lack of a central skill resource repository, organizations are constantly re-inventing the wheel. For example, hundreds of activist groups are writing "How To Write an Effective Press Release" fact sheets. Thousands of peace groups wrote leaflets to oppose the US invasion of Iraq. These resources range from professional quality to fliers that are poorly laid out, text-only, a single column, use strange fonts, and make excessive use of bold, capitals or underlining. The quality of the content varies too. If a social movement is writing thousands of press releases and distributing hundreds of thousands of leaflets then we should invest in quality. For people who are writing poor quality materials, they need to see better examples so that they can learn how to improve. For new authors and people developing new ideas and new campaigns, a resource clearinghouse will provide them with a way to distribute their material and get feedback. People will be motivated to spend the hours necessary to develop quality materials if they know that their material can be widely distributed through a resource clearinghouse. It is possible that an anti-war leaflet could be used by a hundred groups, and that they could distribute tens of thousands of copies. Even the best writers would benefit from being part of a team of activists from across the US (or even the world) who would electronically collaborate in producing the best resource possible – whether it's a leaflet, fact-sheet, poster, or book.

Collaboration could be done on something as simple as a leaflet, or as elaborate as an organizing guide written by dozens of activists. A person could choose which chapters you wanted, choose a layout, press a button and dynamically create a PDF of your own customized organizing guide (I did a trial run, it is not hard to do). Currently the Midwest Academy's "Organizing For Social Change" is the best available option, however there are alternative

methods of organizing that deserve to be represented as well. An organization could publish it as a book to make it easier to read. You can take a resource and adjust it for your local group or campaign, particularly if the resource is distributed in an editable format (ex. in PageMaker, Microsoft Publisher, Word, or an open standard). Alternatively an innovative resource might stimulate the creation of similar materials. For instance, students have created Disorientation Guides for which they have researched the history of their university and past activist movements, its ties to corporations, and provide a list of ways for first-year students to get involved in progressive social change. CampusActivism.org has Disorientation Guides from eight different schools.

CampusActivism.org has over 400 resources and approximately 1500 resource downloads per month. It is one of the few websites where users can upload an organizing material to a place where it will be seen and downloaded by a larger number of people. However, this is just a start. We should have resource clearinghouses with thousands of resources, and tens of thousands of downloads per month. We also need to work on collaboratively producing materials. So far 13myths.org has shown how this can work with their fact-sheets like: **13 Myths About the Case for War in Iraq**. These resources should be distributed across the web by using RSS feeds and web services. For instance, you can subscribe to a RSS feed from CampusActivism.org providing the newest resources, and using web services you can even send CampusActivism.org a search (ex. find all the resources on the issue of racism) and have the results appear on your site. This sharing of information is the beginning of a dynamic revolution that is gradually shaking up the World Wide Web.

What Activists Need – Trainings

Skill materials need to be accompanied with in-person training (and ultimately applied to local campaigns). To get this training, activists need to know about conferences and trainings that are near them. While some organizations are able to provide trainings for their members, not all organizations have the funding or time to do this. For trainings or events that have a high degree of skill component (as opposed to their issues/campaigns component), it makes sense to open them up and publicize them to other activists in the area. It can often be easier to plan an event (ex. find speakers) than to recruit for it. Every year, there are hundreds of conferences and trainings often organized by part-time activists who do it as volunteers and without access to a database or strong network of people and groups who might attend. For instance, several years ago, a student at Bard College organized a weekend-long activist conference. Bard spent several thousands dollars on it, but it only attracted ten people. While there a large number of conferences, often local activists are not aware of events in their own or neighbouring communities. Being able to attend a local conference is especially important for maximizing accessibility (ex. easier for people who work or have other responsibilities to attend) and thus attendance. One solution here is to create an activism event calendar that is syndicated so that it appears on dozens or more of sites. There are some sites that have general calendars (Protest.Net, CampusActivism.org), and a much larger group that have organizational calendars, but no one has managed to achieve critical mass. The other solution is to create a public database of groups and people – to facilitate event outreach.

What Activists Need – Allies

I am a strong believer that people should work on local campaigns and build regional and national networks by finding other people who are working on a similar campaign in their own community. The critical part is helping these people to find each other. Often national organizations are able to do this, but for the issues where national organizations have limited resources (ex. try organizing the US student environmental movement on \$30,000/year like the Student Environmental Action Coalition does) or do not exist – then having a website where you can find these people is very helpful. Such a site aids national organizations that can encourage their members to sign-up and find like-minded people on their own. It removes the bureaucracy of having to go through the bureaucracy of the national office, before communicating with a real live grassroots activist. In addition, an online database would encourage people to work with groups outside of their traditional network – potentially reducing the harmful fragmentation of the Left.

CampusActivism.org has over 1500 groups and 3500 people – all of whom added themselves. An activist can find people and groups that are near you, and/or ones that are working on the same issue. In addition, this information is shared publicly using web services. Another website could send a query for all the labor activists in a state and publish the information on its own site. They could simply install the existing CampusActivism.org interface to do this, or develop their own.

What Activists Need – Sharing and Democratic Control

Many activist organizations have realized the importance of using open source software and of building a community around that. This is an important first step, but we need to go beyond sharing code to sharing data. There is a wealth of data that can be shared without violating privacy or threatening organizational identity. Currently we most commonly see sharing happening in blogs, where you can subscribe to a blog's RSS feed. However, I am much more interested in the potential from sharing information about contacts (groups and people), resources (skills and issue materials), events, and speakers/trainers. People should be able to choose whether to share their information. People should control their information and any content they add to a website. People should be empowered by being able to publish their information on a high-traffic website (or better yet a network of websites) in a place where it will be seen and used. That is what CampusActivism.org lets them do.

Organizations need to adopt a default policy of distributing their materials copyright free (a.k.a. Creative Commons License). Several years ago, the Student Environmental Action Coalition adopted this policy and has made its best resources available online. This should include fact-sheets, leaflets, essays, graphics, publications (even books), computer software (ex. a customized database system – without the data of course), even descriptions of office systems, and more. There is no telling what might be useful. For instance, I would also love to see workshop outlines shared. If we share them, then new trainers will be able to take an outline and modify it to fit their personal ideas and experience. Using an outline of a more experienced trainer will give new people the confidence they need to take the leap into giving workshops and will allow them to start off giving effective ones.

Sharing rich content (events, resources, people, groups, campaign updates, and more) will allow grassroots organizations to make their website more exciting and dynamic by pulling in feeds from other sites. These organizations should be able to pick and choose from a wide array of feeds and web services, to choose quality content that matches the issues, constituency, and geographical area that fit best with their membership. As grassroots organizations start to adopt content management systems (like CivicSpace/Drupal), the use of feeds will increase. But before they do that, someone needs to create the feeds and web services.

What Activists Need – A Tech Community

We need to follow the example of CivicSpace/Drupal (a popular content management system used by many liberal non-profits) and build a community of developers and users around activist website technology. Note that this tech community requires the participation of non-techies who know absolutely zero about computer programming or website design, as we must know the needs of activists so we can fulfill them. There is a small community, but it is fractured and needs work. For instance a lot of developers are concentrated in consulting firms that are helping liberal non-profits and Democrats win elections – and this group is separated from more radical activist techies who work on projects like Indymedia. Efforts like the annual Advocacy Developers conference (organized by Aspiration Tech - <http://aspirationtech.org/>) are a step forwards. We need ambitious proposals, like an online collaboratively written organizing guide or a quality national activist discussion forum, and to motivate activists to learn how to program so that we can achieve them. Progressives need to invest more of their time and money strategically in new web technology that focuses on movement building and that will lift all progressive boats in the rising tide of justice.

Conclusion

I believe we are at a starting point for democratizing online activism. CampusActivism.org is one example that I would like to see built-upon and spurn others to develop their own innovative movement building projects. I want people to use CampusActivism.org to create online activist networks in their own countries – like activists have done with Indymedia.org. I hope we will see the birth of a new era of online activism which mobilizes the talents of the millions of part-time activists and would-be activists to strengthen existing networks, build new ones, and to fundamentally shift the national and international balance of power to the left.

-Aaron Kreider-

For Additional Information

-CampusActivism.org / ActivismNetwork.org – my project
-<http://www.ActivismNetwork.org/developers/> - for people who want to help.
-<http://www.campusactivism.org/links.php> – a list of interesting online activist and networking projects.

-“Network-Centric Advocacy.” Marty Kearns.

<http://activist.blogs.com/networkcentricadvocacypaper.pdf>

-“Movement as Network.” Gideon Rosenblatt.

<http://www.campusactivism.org/server-new/uploads/movementasnetwork-final-1.0.pdf>

-“Organizing for Social Change.” Kim Bobo, Jackie Kendall, Steve Max,
Midwest Academy.

-Creative Commons Licenses. <http://creativecommons.org/>

-CivicSpaceLabs - <http://www.civicspacelabs.org/>

-Drupal. <http://www.drupal.org>

-Aspiration Tech. <http://www.aspirationtech.org>

- “Election 2006: People Powered Politics.” MoveOn Report.

<http://pol.moveon.org/2006report/>

-“MoveOn.org: No Longer a Start-up or an Upstart.” Chris Nolan.

<http://www.personaldemocracy.com/node/218>

<http://www.personaldemocracy.com/node/224>

-“Activism, Inc.: How the Outsourcing of Grassroots Campaigns Is Strangling
Progressive Politics in America.” Dana R. Fischer.